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“The unbounded power of eloquence”: Banville, Conrad, and Metamodernism

Modernism’s singular allure for contemporary novelists and critics alike raises a number of questions, problems, and interpretative opportunities. What do these shared attachments reveal about the legacies of modernism today? What feelings does modernism inspire, and what values do those feelings imply? Why do contemporary novels invoke modernist writing with such urgency, and what conceptions of modernism emerge from these engagements? Should we take seriously the idea that contemporary fiction might affect the praxis of modernist criticism? Though too extensive, complex, and diverse a phenomenon to comprehensively address in this essay, through a reading of John Banville’s fiction, I hope to shed light on the critical stakes of modernism’s powerful appeal for scholars and writers today. I argue that Banville represents a particularly suggestive example of the contemporary tendency to mobilise modernism’s unbounded emotive potential, both in his affectively disorientating allusions to (in)famous modernist works, and through his invocation and extension of modernist anxieties about the affective power of eloquence.¹

Critical debates about Banville continue to be shaped by the vexed question of whether his novels are best considered modernist or postmodernist. Rüdiger Imhof, in the first monograph published on the author, argued that “Banville’s true context (*pace* all those critics who believe that the apotheosis of all things Irish is their real business) is the international level of what has, rightly or wrongly, been termed postmodernist fiction.”² This oddly equivocal polemic is swiftly qualified with the caveat that “in fiction, most of the so-called postmodernist characteristics were implicit in modernism,” and Banville is therefore “a highly conscientious modernist of the post-Joycean, post-Beckettian era” (13). Implicit here is an idea of modernism as a perspective or praxis which can be adopted by a “conscientious” writer after Joyce, and even after Beckett. This idea is replicated across Banville studies, as is the ambivalent gesture of simultaneously invoking and disparaging the labels “modernism” and “postmodernism.” Derek Hand, for instance, claims that “[t]erms like postmodernism and modernism are confusing and unstable” with “no accepted understanding,” and states his intention not “to get bogged down in any ongoing debate about their meaning and, indeed, their relevance or worth to discussing works of literature.”³ Given this expressed scepticism, it is surprising that Hand then goes on to discuss Banville in precisely these terms, even giving his introduction the title: “John Banville, Irish Modernism and

¹ I borrow the notion of “affective disorientation” from Sianne Ngai (*Ugly Feelings* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007], 14).

² Rüdiger Imhof, *John Banville: A Critical Introduction* [1989] (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1997), 12.

³ Derek Hand, *John Banville: Exploring Fictions* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2002), 2.

Postmodernism.” If the labels “modernism” and “postmodernism” are so conceptually inadequate, why do these scholars continue to use them to describe Banville? Why is “modernism” in particular so persistently invoked?

Part of the reason, I suggest, is that critics have tended to account for Banville’s novels through the prism of his own statements about literature.⁴ Consequently, Banville has often been placed in a lineage with those writers whom he has praised or marked as influential, including Joyce and Beckett, but also Henry James, Wallace Stevens, Franz Kafka, and several other modernists.⁵ One effect of taking these statements of affiliation seriously is to implicitly assert the aesthetic value of Banville’s fiction through its association with these canonical writers, elevating the importance of both the author and the critic writing about his works. This capitalising on the evaluative connotations of modernism perhaps reflects wider feelings in the academy, where the “expansive tendency” of “the New Modernist Studies” has seen the term applied to an ever-widening literary field.⁶ Another consequence of the authorial emphasis in approaches to Banville is an unwillingness to recognise complex and contested understandings of modernism that lie beyond the author’s own conception; Hand’s refusal “to get bogged down in any ongoing debate” is symptomatic.⁷ Modernism becomes identified with an abstract idea or philosophical belief

⁴ Imhof again establishes the precedent, emblematically opening his study with a reconstruction of “Banville’s way of thinking” from his “theoretical statements,” derived by “converting covert statements into overt ones” (*John Banville*, 13-15). Two decades later, John Kenny argued for the need to pay “more attention than has thus far been granted to Banville’s own view of the matter” of his modernism (*John Banville* [Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009], 14). Joseph McMinn also claims that, “[w]hen we enquire about those contexts which influence Banville’s relation to modernism and postmodernism, we should make good use of the context supplied by his own reading” (“Versions of Banville, Versions of Modernism,” in *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories*, ed. Liam Harte and Michael Parker [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000], 88).

⁵ The following examples are representative rather than exhaustive: Hand, *John Banville*, 12-21; Imhof, *John Banville*, 15-21; Kenny, *John Banville*, 12-28; Joseph McMinn, *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 3-8; Brendan McNamee, *The Question for God in the Novels of John Banville 1973-2005: A Postmodern Spirituality* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 6-7; and Kersti Tarien Powell, “‘Not a son but a survivor’: Beckett... Joyce... Banville,” *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 35 (2005), 203-4.

⁶ Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA*, 123:3 (2008), 737. The “expansive tendency” described by Mao and Walkowitz is exemplified by Jessica Berman’s capacious representation of modernism as “a mode that arises in conjunction with impending modernity in many places, guises, attitudes, and temporalities” (*Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2011], 32-3). David James has similarly suggested that much of the “recuperative criticism” of the new modernist studies “assumes that conferring the value-adding epithet *modernist* is inevitably positive for the reinstated writers’ perceived reputation and pedagogical popularity” (“Afterword,” in *The Contemporaneity of Modernism: Literature, Media, Culture*, ed. by Michael D’Arcy and Mathias Nilges [London: Routledge, 2016], 222).

⁷ This unwillingness to engage with the contested nature of “modernism” today is also exemplified

derived but dissociable from modernist writers and their works. Thus, we have monolithic, schematic characterisations: “The modernist writer believes [...] that the world can be said in words” (Hand, 2); “Modernist art turns the focus away from the object and onto the *subject*” (Borg, 331); “Modernism always remained convinced of the traditional notion of the autonomous art work” (Kenny, 17). It is not that these characterisations are necessarily untrue, but that they are distanced from individual modernist works and from Banville’s writing.

By contrast, I propose that Banville’s fiction can be better illuminated by taking up a more focused lens, which makes visible the ways the texts themselves register, reanimate, or respond to modernist literature. My approach is informed by David James and Urmila Seshagiri’s account of what they call “metamodernism” - “contemporary fictions distinguished by inventive, self-conscious relationships with modernist literature.”⁸ This account is predicated on returning to a more precise definition of modernism as “historically conditioned and culturally specific clusters of artistic achievements between the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries” (88). Though their argument is primarily directed at the New Modernist Studies, the stress that James and Seshagiri place on doing justice to “the technical achievements and affective character” (93) of both modernism and its revitalisations in contemporary fiction is equally suggestive for Banville criticism. This essay construes metamodernism less as a category and more as a tool or method for placing into relief a particular intertextual connection.⁹ I show how Banville’s fiction invokes modernism in strange and strangely affective ways, which complicate the felt responses it solicits from “knowing” readers of metamodernism, familiar with the modernist canon. Given the constraints of space and the complexity of capturing the affects of intertextual relationships, I will closely examine a single passage from Banville’s most accomplished novel, *The Sea* (2005), which conspicuously alludes to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899).¹⁰

Like many Banville novels, *The Sea* is a recollective memoir in which the narrator-protagonist describes the past in tandem with an evolving present. Our narrator, Max, has recently

by those critics who use the term without explaining how it is being understood, or why they understand it in the way that they do. For two examples, see: McMinn, “Versions of Banville,” *passim*; Darren J. Borg, “Subjectivity as Espionage, The Dark Legacy of Modernism in John Banville’s *The Untouchable*,” *Irish University Review*, 45:2 (2015), 320.

⁸ David James and Urmila Seshagiri, “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution,” *PMLA*, 129:1 (2014), 88.

⁹ Alison Garden suggests that “metamodernism [...] is as much a methodological practice as an aesthetic strategy,” insofar as contemporary writing that alludes to modernism “positively invites a critical method that reads texts across and through one another” (“Leaving hardly a sign—and no memories”: Roger Casement and the Metamodernist Archive,” *Modernism/modernity Print Plus*, 2:4 [2017], Accessed: January 4 2018 <<https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0032>>).

¹⁰ The title of *The Sea* potentially introduces a Conradian frame of reference.

lost his wife, Anna, to cancer, and has retreated to a guesthouse in a seaside town where he once spent his summers as a child. Max is preoccupied by memories of one summer when he befriended twin siblings, Myles and Chloe Grace. Towards the end of the novel, we learn that Myles and Chloe swam into the sea together and drowned. Though the connections between the present and past narratives are complex, we infer that on some level Max's grief moves him to contemplate and relive earlier experiences of loss, and that Anna's death is the hidden heart of this novel.¹¹ Max often describes his grief in a wry, even parodic, fashion: "Among the more or less harrowing consequences of bereavement is the sheepish sense I have of being an impostor [...] I had been merely a bystander, a bit-player, while Anna did the dying."¹² The suppression, diversion, and ironising of intense emotion is so much a part of the allure and tension of the novel, and indeed of all Banville's novels.

The passage I am going to focus on is a rare instance when Max's grief breaks through the surface. It brings to a close a meandering and otherwise lifeless section detailing the daily routines of the other occupants of the guesthouse, their evenings spent watching TV together:

[W]e watch the comedy shows, favouring the gentler ones repeated from twenty or thirty years ago. We sit in silence, the canned audiences doing our laughing for us. The jittering coloured light from the screen plays over our faces. We are rapt, as mindless as children. Tonight there was a programme on a place in Africa, the Serengeti Plain, I think it was, and its great elephant herds. What amazing beasts they are, a direct link surely to a time long before our time, when behemoths even bigger than they roared and rampaged through forest and swamp. In manner they are melancholy and yet seem covertly amused, at us, apparently. They lumber along placidly in single file, the trunk-tip of one daintily furred around the laughable piggy tail of its cousin in front. The young, hairier than their elders, trot contentedly between their mothers' legs. If one set out to seek among our fellow-creatures, the landbound ones, at least, for our very opposite, one would surely need look no further than the elephants. How is it we have allowed them to survive so long? Those sad little knowing eyes seem to invite one to pick up a blunderbuss. Yes, put a big bullet through there, or into one of those huge absurd flappy ears. Yes, yes, exterminate all the brutes, lop away at the tree of life until only the stump is left standing, then lovingly take the cleaver to that, too. Finish it all off.

You cunt, you fucking cunt, how could you go and leave me like this, floundering in my own foulness, with no one to save me from myself. *How could you.*

Speaking of the television room, I realise suddenly, I cannot think why it did not strike me before now, so obvious is it, that what it reminds me of, what the whole house reminds me of, for that matter, and this must be the real reason I came here to hide in the first place, is the rented rooms my mother and I inhabited, were forced to inhabit, throughout my teenage years. (194-6)

¹¹ Banville also seems to read *The Sea* in this way: "I suspect the book is all about Anna, and her death, and the disaster that that is in [Max's] life. [...] It's so devastating that he can't dwell on it, he has to find other tragedies, other instances of life's cruelty to concentrate on, in order to try and get away from the awful place that he's in" ("John Banville - 'The Sea,'" *Bookclub*, BBC Radio 4 [London: BBC, 10 April 2014]).

¹² John Banville, *The Sea* (London: Picador, 2006), 203-4.

The feelings manifested and solicited by this passage are peculiarly complex; we have erratic and disorientating fluctuations in subject and tone, moving from playfully violent reverie, to rages of loneliness and grief, only to resume a digressive, conversational idiom. But what I particularly want to consider is how these affects might be intensified, compounded, or complicated for readers who recognise “exterminate all the brutes” as the words of Kurtz, the colonist and ivory trader of Conrad’s novella.¹³

Part of why the passage is so discomfiting is the way its playful and jocular tone initially encourages us to read it comically, making the violent turn all the more unsettling. The content and syntactical construction of the opening sentences present Max as highly passive, unresponsive to the external world. Meanwhile, his being as rapt and mindless as a child, his expression of amazement, and the fanciful images of prehistoric behemoths all generate the impression of spontaneous and aimless reverie, more absent-minded daydream than composed observation. The elephants are described in a cartoonish manner, farcically exaggerating their playful behaviours (at the expense of factual accuracy), and predisposing readers to not take these fantasies too seriously.¹⁴ Within this ludic and speculative frame, the passage mischievously sets up and muddles a rhetorical contrast between humans and animals. We have a series of first-person plural pronouns (we, our, us) which collectively invoke humans and exclude animals as “our” other. Yet the elephants are highly anthropomorphic, seeming “melancholy,” “covertly amused,” and “sad”; suggestively, it is on the terrain of emotion that the passage’s binary contrast is constructed and distressed. There is a bawdy comedy to the implication that the elephant is “our very opposite” because the young “trot contentedly between their mothers’ legs,” as though being troubled by maternal sexuality were the essence of being human. The rhetorical question - “How is it that we have allowed them to survive so long?” - still seems to be tongue-in-cheek, satirising rather than

¹³ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, ed. by Cedric Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 155.

¹⁴ “Tail-grasping” is typically a playful gesture - wild elephants do not “tail-grasp” when walking in procession, though elephants in captivity are often trained to do so. This factual inaccuracy suggests that Max is not recalling images from the documentary, but rather fantasising about elephants, and in ways that make them more preposterous and infantile than they would ever appear in real life. Joyce Poole confirmed this information in a personal communication (20 July 2016). See also: Joyce Poole and Petter Granli, “The visual, tactile and acoustic signals of play in African savannah elephants,” in *Endangered Elephants, Past Present & Future (Proceedings of the Symposium on Human-Elephant Relationships and Conflicts)*, ed. Jayantha Jayewardene (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Biodiversity & Elephant Conservation Trust, 2004), 47; and Poole and Granli, “Grasp-Tail,” *ElephantVoices Gestures Database*, ElephantVoices, Accessed: July 20 2016 <<http://www.elephantvoices.org/multimedia-resources/elephant-gestures-database/421-play/social-play/1718-grasp-tail.html?layout=gesture>>.

endorsing this anthropocentric logic. But as the images become increasingly violent, jocularity dissipates, the tone of the passage pivoting on the allusive “exterminate all the brutes.”

In an article which catalogues this and numerous other allusions in *The Sea*, Imhof complains that:

Intertextuality used to be fun or, alternatively, a cause of embarrassment and mortification, depending on whether, as a result of one’s superior knowledge of literature, one could rejoice at having been able to identify the source of a quotation or reference, or whether without such knowledge one had to retire baffled. Today all that is gone: one simply googles everything.¹⁵

This complaint reflects an approach which is concerned only with knowing the source of a quotation, and is uninterested in capturing the performative implications of that knowledge - how an allusion might affect a reader’s experience of a literary work. Mortification, joy, and bafflement are some feelings associated with recognising or failing to recognise allusions. But there are other affective and epistemological possibilities - we can know the source of a quotation without knowing (or feeling we know) its import or implication, as is the case with many allusions in Banville’s writing, including my example. There is, no doubt, a cerebral pleasure in recognising the clever irony of Max using the ivory trader’s words in his imagined ferocity towards the elephants. Max’s rage also seems more pathetic when compared with Kurtz’s genocidal fantasy. Yet the allusion - and the word “brutes” itself, with its semantic slippage between animals and animal-like persons - brings into relief how the passage’s rhetorical distinction between humans and “others” mobilises the same logic behind Kurtz’s more manifestly ethically abhorrent impulse.¹⁶ That is, the context and mode of this allusion invokes Conrad’s text in its entanglement with contemporaneous imperialist ideologies, which have a distinct ethical and affective charge in our present moment.¹⁷ Further, the slipperiness of the paragraph, which never allows us to decide how sincere or satirical

¹⁵ Rüdiger Imhof, “*The Sea*: ‘Was’t Well Done?’,” *Irish University Review*, 36:1 (2006), 179.

¹⁶ The semantic slipperiness of “brutes” is, of course, also exploited by Conrad, with Kurtz potentially referring to elephants, the indigenous Africans, or the European colonisers. For Giorgio Agamben, the endpoint of the logic of human inclusion/exclusion is the totalitarian camp: “not only theology and philosophy but also politics, ethics, and jurisprudence are drawn and suspended in the difference between man and animal. [...] [C]oncentration and extermination camps are [...] an extreme and monstrous attempt to decide between the human and the inhuman, which has ended up dragging the very possibility of the distinction to its ruin” (*The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004], 22). Primo Levi writes: “the *Lager* was a great machine to reduce us to beasts” (*If This is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf [New York: Orion Press, 1959], 39).

¹⁷ Alison Garden has recently discussed the potential influence of the anti-colonialist turned Irish nationalist Roger Casement on Conrad’s depiction of Kurtz, and the metamodernist invocation of both Casement and Conrad in W. G. Sebald’s *Die Ringe des Saturn* (1995) (“Leaving hardly a sign—and no memories”: Roger Casement and the Metamodernist Archive”).

it is being, leaves us profoundly uncertain whether Max, or the novel itself, indicts or uncritically reproduces such sentiments.

Uncertainties of a different order are introduced with the sudden tirade of expletives beginning “You cunt, you fucking cunt.” The sudden invective is all the more arresting for our not knowing, at first, who is being addressed (could it be us?), before recognising that this bitter accusation of abandonment is directed at Anna, Max’s dead wife. There is yet another abrupt change in register with the long final sentence of the quotation, the adopted conversational idiom unconvincing in its excess of digressions and self-qualifications. The movement between paragraphs seems to stage a breakdown of articulacy and a retreat from emotion into the refuge of idle chatter. By exhibiting how discourse might be a way of *not* attending to overwhelming emotion, the final sentence raises the troubling prospect that some or all of Max’s narration might be mere diversion. This anxiety is intensified by the allusion, which involves the “knowing” reader in complex intertextual connections, only to provoke the suspicion that we might have failed to notice what is really going on in the passage - that Max’s rambling on about elephants might be a way of distracting himself (and us) from devastating grief.

Fears about failing to notice the feelings of others are especially pronounced in Banville’s fiction, with the plots of many novels, including *The Sea*, turning on a misunderstanding of someone else’s emotional life (“my life,” Max laments, “with its so many misreadings” [184]). The passage provokes us to worry about the potential to misread, but it also playfully thematises this in the deceptively innocuous observation about elephants: “In manner they are melancholy and yet seem covertly amused, at us, apparently.” Given how the subsequent writing moves precisely between manners of amusement and melancholy, any of this narration might be deceiving in appearance, archly performing emotion and being covertly amused by our naive response. Commenting on the opening line of *The Sea*, Adam Phillips perceptively remarks: “always in Banville’s fiction, allusions are being made, and being alluded to, without our ever knowing quite how knowing the narrator is being (is the notorious allusiveness of Modernist literature also being burlesqued here? Is he alluding to the idea of literature being allusive? There is no way of knowing.)”¹⁸ What I want to emphasise is that such uncertainties are a vital aspect of the experience of reading Banville’s fiction, and that affectively complex allusions of ambiguous implication are a crucial way in which the novel involves readers in its explorations of knowing and doubt.

The cardinal significance of uncertainty to Banville’s aesthetic points to a different kind of connection with Conrad’s fiction, and particularly *Heart of Darkness*, which is famously

¹⁸ Adam Phillips, “Introduction,” *The Book of Evidence & The Sea* by John Banville (London: Everyman, 2015), xv.

characterised by experiences of obscurity, incomprehension, and confusion. Max and Marlow are both men in search of meaning, telling tales to make sense of the present and past, and largely failing in their efforts. (For Edward Said, this was the presiding concern of all Conrad's fiction.)¹⁹ Ian Watt claimed that "*Heart of Darkness* embodies more thoroughly than any previous fiction the posture of uncertainty and doubt; one of Marlow's functions is to represent how much a man cannot know."²⁰ This "posture" found an arch-critic in F. R. Leavis, who, in *The Great Tradition*, faulted Conrad's "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery [...] applied to the evocation of human profundities and spiritual horrors."²¹ Chinua Achebe, in his canonical essay, "An Image of Africa," endorses Leavis's view and suggests that Conrad was "engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery," and so played on the (racist) "psychological predisposition of his readers."²² But, where for Leavis the "actual effect" of this stress on experiences of doubt "is not to magnify but rather to muffle" the novella's evocative power (177), for Achebe, *Heart of Darkness* is dangerously moving; as "undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction" (2), Conrad was too capable of manipulating readers' emotions, and in unethical ways.

Without entering the fraught debate about whether, in Achebe's words, "Conrad was a bloody racist" (9), following Banville's cue, I want to add to this discussion by pointing out that *Heart of Darkness* not only exploits, but *worries* about, the ethical implications of moving language - and does so most directly in the passage *The Sea* alludes to.²³ J. Hillis Miller writes: "'Heart of Darkness' is a masterwork of irony, as when the eloquent idealism of Kurtz's pamphlet on 'The Suppression of Savage Customs' is undercut by the phrase scrawled at the bottom: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'"²⁴ There is some truth to this, but if we turn to the passage, we see that Kurtz's eloquence is presented as more of an affective, ambivalent phenomenon than "idealism" and

¹⁹ Said claims that "[t]he characteristic, idiomatic twist in every Conrad story is that the attempt to see a direct relation between the past and the present, to see past and present as a continuous surface of interrelated events, is frustrated" (*Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2008], 95).

²⁰ Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980), 174.

²¹ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 177.

²² Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," *Research in African Literatures*, 9:1 (1978), 3-4.

²³ My rhetorical contrast between Achebe's apparently "simple" view and my own "complex" one is made with a cautious awareness of Padmini Mongia's critique; I have no intention, implicitly or otherwise, to "join forces" with or exculpate Conrad ("The Rescue: Conrad, Achebe, and the Critics," *Conradiana*, 33:2 [2001], 155).

²⁴ J. Hillis Miller, "Should We Read 'Heart of Darkness'?", in *Conrad in Africa: New Essays on 'Heart of Darkness'*, ed. Attie De Lange, Gail Fincham and Wiesław Krajka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 25.

“irony” might suggest. Marlow not only recounts the pamphlet, but gives a highly charged description of the intense feelings it stirred in him: “It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words” (155).²⁵ Just a few lines earlier, Marlow quotes Kurtz’s description of how by “the simple exercise of our will we [whites] can exert a power for good practically unbounded,” the repetition implicating eloquence in Kurtz’s exercise of oppressive power. Marlow later describes Kurtz’s mesmerising force: “A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart” (176). Much more could be said here, but these examples should be enough to illustrate that *Heart of Darkness*, especially in the cited passage, both exploits and worries about “the unbounded power of eloquence.”

John E. Van Domelen suggests that “Conrad, like Shakespeare, was a master of language who distrusted and feared the persuasive power of rhetoric.”²⁶ Something similar might also be said of Banville, though for both Conrad and Banville there seems to be an ambivalence rather than simple mistrust, given the fascination and skill with which both writers pursue technical innovations which open up new affective possibilities. As Derek Attridge points out, any “modernism after modernism necessarily involves a reworking of modernism’s methods, since nothing could be less modernist than a repetition of previous modes, however disruptive they were in their time.”²⁷ Ian Watt famously described one of Conrad’s “minor innovations” in technique which he termed “delayed decoding” (176), where inchoate sensory impressions are described prior to coherent comprehension of the event (the scene of the attack on Marlow’s boat being a notable example). Watt shows how, through this technique, “the reader participates in the instantaneous sensations” - and momentary confusions - of protagonists (176).²⁸ We have seen one of Banville’s own innovative forms for producing similar affects, in putting into motion

²⁵ There is clearly a self-reflexive implication to this description, which sounds almost like a critical appreciation in the style of Walter Pater. Max Saunders suggestively includes Kurtz’s pamphlet in a list of “literary works described but not delivered” in late nineteenth and early twentieth century fiction (*Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiographical Fiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 348).

²⁶ John E. Van Domelen, “In the Beginning Was the Word, or Awful Eloquence and Right Expression in Conrad,” *The South Central Bulletin*, 30:4 (1970), 228.

²⁷ Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 5. Kevin Brazil has discussed Attridge’s claim about contemporary reworkings of modernism in his essay for this cluster (“An Embarrassment of Lateness”).

²⁸ We might think of this technical innovation as furthering the formal possibilities of the novel in Watt’s own terms; “the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience—individual experience which is always unique and therefore new [...] set an unprecedented value on originality” (*The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972], 13-14).

ethically-weighted allusions of undeterminable relevance and implication, making readers acutely conscious of their own agency in drawing connections, and raising the possibility that such connections might be a way of failing to know the text. This peculiar mode of allusion invokes “modernism” as a site of extraordinary expansion of the formal and affective possibilities of fiction, but also as an archive, history, and praxis which cannot be untangled from complex ideological currents which, in a different political moment, we might now wish to censor or censure. Where Conrad largely articulates an ambivalence about eloquence through Marlow, Banville’s novels give us fiercely articulate narrators who describe their affective experiences in intensely compelling ways, only to show us that sometimes such language is only performance, and so involving readers in worrying about the possibilities and dangers of moving language.

These intricate entanglements illustrate the degree to which metamodernist engagements with modernism can be more affective than conceptual - an insight which should guide our approaches to them. As this essay demonstrates, it is far easier to catalogue an allusion than capture some part of its semantic and affective implication, and allusion is perhaps the most concrete form of intertextual relation; contemporary reanimations of modernism that are more felt than empirically observable place correspondingly greater demands on the critic. We are best able to address the contemporary legacies of modernism, I suggest, by pursuing textually immersive readings, which attend closely to the aesthetic and affective complexities of some of the most remarkable literary works of the present moment.